Is this picture worth a thousand words? An analysis of Harry Burrell's photograph of a thylacine with a chicken

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ABSTRACT

In 1921 a photograph of a thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus* carrying a chicken in its mouth appeared in *The Australian Museum Magazine* with the caption "copyright photo from life – H. Burrell". In 1926, A.S. Le Souef and Harry Burrell used the same photograph to illustrate the entry for the thylacine in *The Wild Animals of Australasia*. Robert Paddle (2000) considers the picture to be one of the chief causes of a "blossoming of the construction that the thylacine was a significant poultry predator" and notes that the photograph has been used in many published works. However, a former associate of Burrell suggests that the figure in the photograph is not a live animal, but a mounted specimen placed against a "bush background". With the assistance of digital imaging programs, a close analysis of the glass plate negative of this photograph is undertaken to determine the veracity of the claim. I conclude that the figure in the photograph is indeed a mounted specimen. Certain circumstantial evidence connected with the historical and textual contexts in which the image was produced and published is also discussed. As one of the last in a series of negative representations of the thylacine in zoological works, the photograph's prolonged uncritical reception demonstrates the deceptive potential of photography and suggests that we see what we are conditioned to see.

Key words: Thylacine, extinct animals, animal representation, human-animal relations, photography.

Introduction

Photographs are seductive. When the first examples of the medium appeared in the late 1830s they were seen as marvellous, as "natural magic", and as an alternative to drawing (Talbot 1839). They were also perceived as "accurate and faithful" to the objects they represented and as "integumental likenesses – as passive recordings of pre-existing sights" (Snyder 1994). In similar vein, Susan Sontag (1997) comments on the authority invested in the work that photographers do and remarks that photographed images "do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it". When photographs of the thylacine first appeared in zoological and natural history works in the early twentieth century they seemed to present evidence about the animal that was above the artist's 'eye' or imagination, which, from the earliest days of European settlement in Tasmania had produced confused and fanciful visual and verbal constructions that contributed to the dominant narrative of threat that arose around this elusive animal. Most nineteenth century publications emanated from Europe and illustrations showed a form based on badly stuffed specimens or previous images. Even after the first live specimens arrived in Europe, the shape of the animal was misfigured and ominous signifiers that reiterated fears associated with species like the hyena and wolf were added to images. From the 1870s to 1900 most illustrations and texts focused on the predatory habits of the species, extending earlier accusations of sheep killing and encouraging the application of the government bounty of 1888-1909 that significantly reduced the population of thylacines in Tasmania (Freeman forthcoming). Paddle (2000) has found little evidence for significant sheep or poultry predation by the thylacine, but notes that this "myth" became cemented in popular perceptions and scientific construction of the species to such an extent that it has become accepted as fact.

With few illustrations in zoological publications before 1900 being accurate or wholly representative of the animal, photographs taken in New York, London, Washington and Australian zoos in the early twentieth century were particularly important in redefining the species. Indeed, they revealed a very different form, situation and behavior, contested the ideas previously suggested and opened a space in which more sympathetic attitudes toward the thylacine could have been generated. But, while these photographs captured the image of a rarely sighted species, there were limitations related to the location of the animals and the capacity of the medium at that time. For instance, cameras were large and cumbersome and it was usually impossible to avoid including the wire mesh and concrete of an enclosure in the photographs.[1] Many thylacines were in small, badly lit cages and some photographs show evidence of distortion as the camera failed to adjust to the limited angle of vision. Technical limitations such as shutter speed in early cameras meant that any movement of the animal resulted in a blurred image (Berridge 1911). For instance, a photograph of a thylacine used to illustrate a paper by Sharland (1938) in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW* shows the effect of movement on the quality of the picture. Despite, or sometimes because of, these restrictions early photographs are seen as accurate, objective and an invaluable aid to the "investigation of nature" (Lankester 1923), while assumptions of authority in relation to zoological works allow the photographs that appeared in them to accumulate integrity.

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[1] W.S. Berridge (1911), photographer at London Zoo in the early twentieth century, describes the difficulties involved in photographing animals with early cameras. He mentions "patience" as the primary quality required for successful photographs and outlines the difficulty of avoiding the shadows from bars and wire cages. In *Rambles round the Zoo (1923)* Australian photographer, Charles Barrett, records how he jumped the wire to photograph a young Tasmanian 'tiger' at Melbourne Zoo. This option, however, was not always available, nor did it guarantee a good photograph, especially if the animal was disturbed by the presence of a human in the cage.

The idea of the photograph as 'evidence', however, had been compromised not long after the invention of photography when the first techniques for retouching negatives were exhibited at the Paris World Fair in 1855 (MacQuire 1998). It also became apparent that photographs could be cropped, reduced, blown up, and embellished to produce different effects. In 1904, heralding an increase in photo manipulation following the perfection of the half-tone printing technique and a subsequent reaction to the practice, Sadakichi Hartman railed against the application of paint and pen for the purposes of "individual expression" (Newhall 1980; Lowrey 1998). But there were other ways in which the content of a photograph could be determined. While it is understood that human subjects are often posed before a picture is taken, it is not so often realised that the natural world can also be re-arranged to comply with pictorial conventions. In the past this was often achieved by the removal of trees and placing of objects or figures in the foreground (Bonyhady 2000), while on the level of photographic process, several negatives could be printed together, or several photographs could be cut, pasted, retouched and then rephotographed, to form a composite image. For instance, in 1910 Frank Hurley combined photographs of stags in various positions at the Sydney Zoo into a "family setting" (Bickel 1980). Later, as official Australian war photographer for both world wars, Hurley produced images of exploding bombs, ruined landscapes and wounded men in dramatic atmospheric conditions using up to twelve negatives, double exposure and enlargement (O'Keefe 1986).[2] Around the 1920s and 30s, photographic fakes were enjoyed for their "humour or sensationalism" (Gavard 1999). A well-known example produced in 1917 shows a young girl watching a group of fairies dancing on a log. Photographic experts could not be certain it was a fraud and some declared the Cottingley Fairies authentic. It was not until 65 years later, when the perpetrators of the photograph admitted that the image was achieved with cut-out shapes and hat pins, that it was confirmed as a hoax (Garvard 1999). But perhaps the most infamous contrived representations are those photographed by Edward Curtis, who removed indications of twentieth century influences and introduced traditional 'props', as well as suggestive captions, to construct images of a "vanishing race" of American Indians between 1907 and 1930, at the same time claiming that his work complied with the "strictest standards of scientific accuracy" (Jackson 1992). Lowrey (1998) maintains that during this era news photos were also shaped to the expectations and preferences of the public and to illustrate preconceived ideas that were regarded as "interesting".

This, then, was photography practice in the early twentieth century when the compelling image of a thylacine with a chicken appeared in *The Australian Museum Magazine* and *The Wild Animals of Australasia* (Figure 1). As the

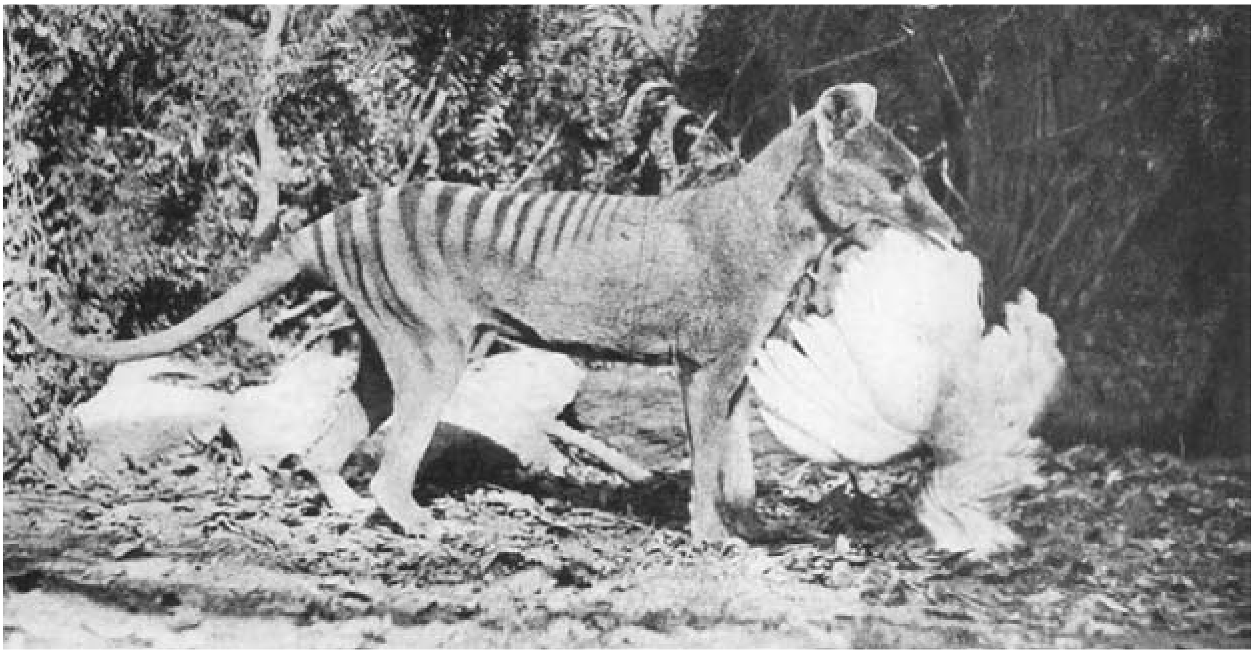

Figure 1. The photograph of a thylacine with a chicken as it appears in the *Australian Museum Magazine* 1:3 1921.

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[2] Frank Hurley is perhaps best known for the photographs and film of Shackleton's Antarctic expedition in 1914. Some of his war photographs are considered by one biographer to be "reminiscent of a 1920s Hollywood movie" (O'Keefe 1986). The composite pictures he produced provoked criticism and controversy for compromising "the veracity of the photographic record" (Thomson 1999), but Hurley's justification was that they were the only way "to illustrate to the public the things our fellows do and how war is conducted. They can only be got by printing a result from a number of negatives or re-enactment" (O'Keefe 1986).

only photograph of a thylacine in possession of domestic prey, the 'thousand words' this picture encapsulates is that the thylacine is predominantly a threat to livestock — a representation temporarily submerged at the time by pictures of docile animals in zoo enclosures. And, at first sight, it seems that few of the adjustments I have mentioned above could apply to the image. However, in his book *The Last Tasmanian Tiger* (2000) Paddle has noted that the photograph has been cropped to omit a cage environment and that the suggestion has been made in popular publications that the thylacine in the picture has come out of the wild to raid a hen house. Paddle includes a version that is deposited in the Norman Laird Collection, Archives Office of Tasmania, revealing a wire fence behind the figure. He states that the photograph shows a captive thylacine in James Harrison's private zoo in Wynyard, Tasmania, but provides no evidence for his statement except that "Harrison's cages emphasised natural environments". A similar location is suggested in descriptive captions for several reproductions of the image both before and after Paddle's book was published, but similarly, no supporting evidence is offered.[3] But what if there are ways so far *not considered* in which the illustration is not what it seems? In the light of contemporary photographic practices and an intriguing and apparently disregarded claim in Laird's folder of photographs and cuttings in the Tasmanian Archives, this paper offers a fresh encounter with the photograph of the thylacine with a chicken.

Discovery in the Archives

Norman Laird (1915-1978) was an associate of Harry Burrell at the now defunct Institute of Anatomy in Canberra in the 1930s where he trained as a scientific artist under Sir Colin Mackenzie and became interested in photographing microscopic objects, particularly those relating to histological and anatomical dissections. During this time, he supplied scientific illustrations for Australian museums and universities, as well as the Smithsonian Institute and Field Museum of Natural History (Laird 1943-78). He moved to Tasmania around 1940 where, for most of his life, he was a professional filmmaker and photographer with membership of the prestigious London Institute of Photographers and the production of 90 films, hundreds of published photographs, and several books to his credit (Greener 1971; Margaret Laird-Valentine pers. comm. 2004). From 1942-45 he worked with the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit in Darwin where he was engaged in photographic interpretation, tropical long-distance combat photography, instructing USA Air Force personnel in air photography, and the production of 154,000 aerial prints for the North Australian Coastal survey. During 1947 and 48 he was photographer-in-charge on the first A.N.A.R.E. expedition to Macquarie Island, where he also carried out a collection and survey of the botany of the island.[4] He initiated the Tasmanian Government Film Unit, which he managed during the 1950s and 60s, making films and taking photographs for the Departments of Agriculture, Tourism and Forestry. He was considered an outstanding photographer, with expertise in the production of instructional and documentary films, as well as aerial and scientific photography. In addition, his wildlife photographs and articles appeared regularly in the popular magazine *Walkabout,* American and European nature magazines and also in *The Australian Museum Magazine* (Laird 1943-78).[5] In the 1970s he edited one of the first books about wilderness photography, *The World of Olegas Truchanus*, working with a team that included photographer Peter Dombrovskis and contributing a preface to the work (Angus 1975).[6] Particularly pertinent to this paper, in the 1960s he led the Tasmanian Thylacine Research Group, communicating with the directors of museums and zoos in Europe, America and Australia on subjects ranging from early illustrations of the thylacine and first hand accounts of the animal, to old photographs of the species. A collection of letters to institutions and individuals, such as David Fleay, director of Healesville Sanctuary in Victoria, in a private collection (Laird 1943-78) attests to the breadth and depth of his investigation of the species. His views on photographs of the thylacine are encapsulated in a typewritten note on "Art and the Thylacine" in a plastic folder of letters. He writes, "undoubtedly the photograph, no matter its age is a better guide to the shape and form of this animal than any historical plate, and in the final analysis, though it is a myth to believe that the camera cannot lie, it may be said that from the scientific point of view, it lies less than the brush and pen" (Laird 1943-78).

A considerable amount of material relating to Laird's photographic career, including papers and photographs of his Antarctic visit and native plants and animals, has been deposited in the State Archives Office in Hobart (Laird 1945-77).[7] Among this material are many photographic

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[3] These include reproductions in *The Advocate,* Friday March 17, 1972 and David Owen's recent book *Thylacine: The Tragic Tale of the Tasmanian Tiger* (2003). Only Paddle credits Burrell with photography of the image.

[4] The collection of several thousand specimens, with copious field notes and diagrams, is held in the Tasmanian Herbarium, University of Tasmania.

[5] For instance, he contributed several photographs for an article by J.R. Kinghorn in *The Australian Museum Magazine* (1944). The quality of these photographs compared to others in the *Magazine* around this time, including some by Burrell (Troughton 1943, 1944), is particularly noticeable. His photo "Frilled Lizard with locust" was a well-known cover photo for *Walkabout* (Laird 1945) and he contributed essays to this publication on wildlife and botanical subjects, for instance, in 1945, 1946, 1948 and 50. He also wrote and illustrated articles for American *Nature Magazine* and the Dutch magazine *Panorama* (Laird 1943-78).

[6] Other notable achievements include a documentary film about the Sydney to Hobart yacht race, *Hard to Windward*, which won an international award for a sporting film (Laird 1943-78) and a detailed photographic record and analysis of the carvings of convict Daniel Herbert on the Ross Bridge in Tasmania that he produced with Leslie Greener (Greener 1971).

[7] This is only part of a collection of photographs, letters, testimonials and newspaper cuttings that are meticulously mounted and preserved and held in a private collection (Laird 1943-78). Laird's passion for photography and preserving material items was exceptional.

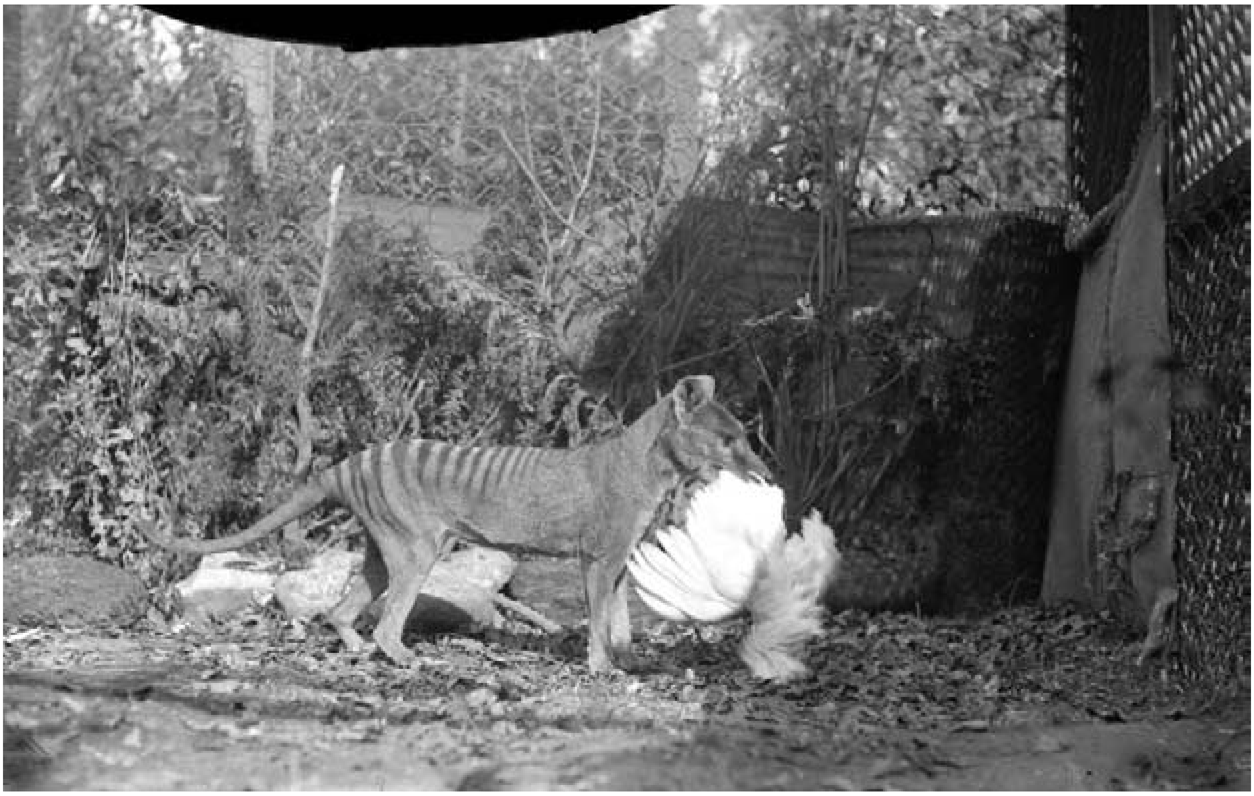

Figure 2. A high-resolution scan of glass plate negative V8221 showing the full view of the thylacine with a chicken photograph. Australian Museum Archives: series 392.

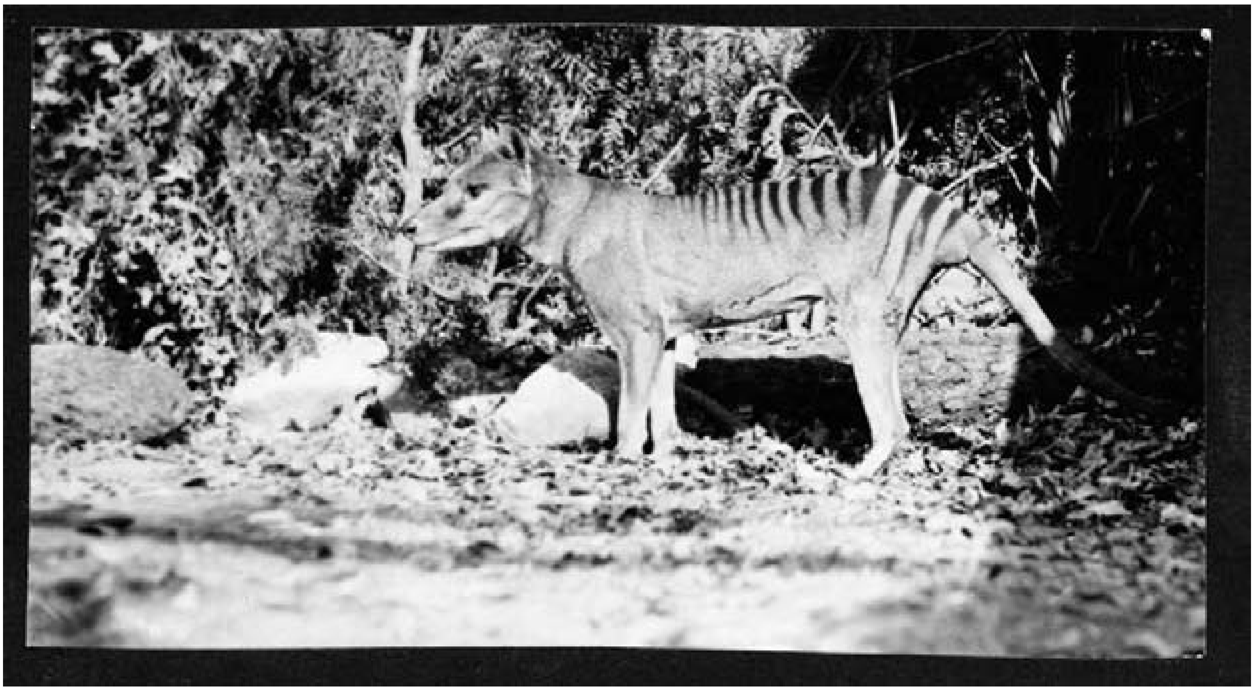

Figure 3. The "Harry Burrell original" of a thylacine without a chicken in Norman Laird's folder NS1143/1. State Archives Office, Tasmania.

negatives and prints of the thylacine; pictures from this collection are often used to illustrate popular and academic publications. The album in which the chicken photograph appears was assembled in the 1960s and 70s (Laird-Valentine pers. comm. 2005). It consists of newspaper cuttings, photocopies and reference material resulting from Laird's research on the species. Items relating to Harry Burrell's photographs take up considerable space in folder NS1143/1. Laird shows examples of their use and misuse, for instance, how a figure of the thylacine without a chicken has been "pirated" for other publications without crediting Burrell as the photographer and how it has been touched up to constitute "a good likeness of the real animal" — an indication of the integrity and professionalism with which Laird approached the subject of photography, and a suggestion that the figure it shows is not a live specimen. The "Harry Burrell original" placed above a reproduction of this "likeness" is shown in Figure 3. Laird states that this original was "taken at the same time and of the same animal as that published in *The Wild Animals of Australasia*".[8] This implies that the chicken photograph may also contain signs of having been retouched and may not show a live animal. Laird states that Burrell gave him ½ glass plate negatives of both these photographs in the mid-1930s and includes prints of the photographs under flaps of black paper to protect them from light, on which he has a typed note "Rare and Precious Photograph". There are only four glass plate negatives in Laird's extensive collection of thylacine photographs and these are the only prints in the folder, so this reference to the frailty of the material objects, that were at the core of Laird's professional interest, is both understandable and necessary. Laird then states that negatives and print copies of the pictures are also held at the Australian Museum and the Institute of Anatomy. Indeed, a series of glass negatives of these and similar images of the thylacine are currently held in the Australian Museum Archives.

Later in the folder, the chicken photograph appears again, this time in a cutting from Launceston newspaper *The Advocate* March 17, 1972 where its caption claims it is a "rare photograph of a Tasmanian tiger with a freshly killed fowl" and that it was taken in the late 1920s of a thylacine in captivity in a private zoo. This seems to be the origin of the captivity story and in response to this misrepresentation of Burrell's photograph and the lack of acknowledgment of its source, Laird now provides explicit details about the picture. A typewritten note below a photocopy of the article states that the illustration is a copy of the plate from *The Wild Animals of Australasia*; that "the proof is in the identical retouching marks on the head and other parts of the body"; that Harry Burrell took the photograph; and that "the animal was not in a zoo at all. It is a *stuffed specimen* placed against a bush background [my italics]". The tone of the words on the carefully typed note is emphatic and the arrangement of the photographs and cuttings in the folder implies that Laird felt he was now compelled to make the nature of his previous comments about the photographs clear. I will now take a close look at the photograph of the thylacine with a chicken to see if there is support for Laird's assertions.

Analysing the Photographs

My observations are made with reference to the illustration that appears in *The Australian Museum Magazine*, volume 1 number 3 (1921) and *The Wild Animals of Australasia* (1926) (Figure 1) and high-resolution scans of two glass half-plate negatives (V8221, V8227) in the Harry Burrell Collection (Series 392) in the Australian Museum Archives (Figure 2 and 4). Digital imaging processes can expose details and discrepancies not apparent in published reproductions of the image and not obvious to the naked eye. I also take into account several prints of the negatives in the Harry Burrell Collection and the "Harry Burrell original" in Norman Laird's folder (Figure 3). These different reproductions of the photographs therefore include images in Laird's folder, the negatives he refers to, and the reproductions that were available to the general public from 1921 to the present day. In conjunction with technical considerations, I take note of semiotics – the system of signs inherent in any visual image, text or other form of communication. It is by reading these signs that we endow an image or text with meaning or 'significance' (Chandler 1994). Semiotic analysis involves identifying these signs and recognising the complex associations generated by them, including latent or connotative messages (Thwaites *et al.* 1994). It also includes an awareness of how particular readings construct ideas about an image, the effect of the discourses in which a communication is produced, and assumptions regarding a medium such as photography. Jonathan Culler (1981) defines the study of semiotics as "a zoological pursuit: the semiotician wants to discover what are the species of signs, how they differ from one another, how they function in their native habitat, how they interact with other species" – a particularly appropriate definition in this context. By 'denaturalising' the signs and making the codes in which they operate explicit, I seek to show that the 'reality' some signs appear to present is contestable.

First, it is apparent that all exposures have identical backgrounds – rocks, logs, branches and leaves occur in the same configuration in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4. The thylacine stands in roughly the same location in all versions of the photographs in relation to the rocks and the light-coloured sapling directly behind the nose or tail. As the animal is reversed in two of the exposures it may be necessary to take into consideration differences between its right and left sides if the actual specimen, rather than an image of it, has been reversed. Both the photograph that appears in *The Museum Magazine* and in Laird's folder have been cropped, while the negatives in the Australian Museum Archives show a more extensive scene with a lattice-covered structure to the right of the figure draped with hessian that continues onto the fence behind the animal. There is a thin cross-beam at the top of the chicken wire fence in Figure 4, implying that this is an enclosure of some kind, and what looks like a grassed area lies beyond the enclosure. A closer look at Figures 2 and 4 reveals that the vegetation immediately behind the animal consists of fern fronds that are dry or dead and that the tops of the 'trees' are cut. The "bush background" (Laird 1945-47) is actually a series of branches removed from ferns and trees and placed against the wire fence, while the rocks and tree fern trunks at the base of the fence appear to have been positioned to hold the branches in place. The "natural environment" (Paddle 2000) that we see in the photograph has been constructed, which suggests other aspects of the picture may have been deliberately arranged. The identical shadow of the lattice structure in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicates that the photographs were taken at the same time of the day, although the shadow on the tail of the animal in

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[8] In Laird's folder the note "a portion of this photograph appears as plate 18 in *The Wild Animals of Australasia*" accompanies a somewhat fuller version of the chicken photograph than that which appears in so many published works.

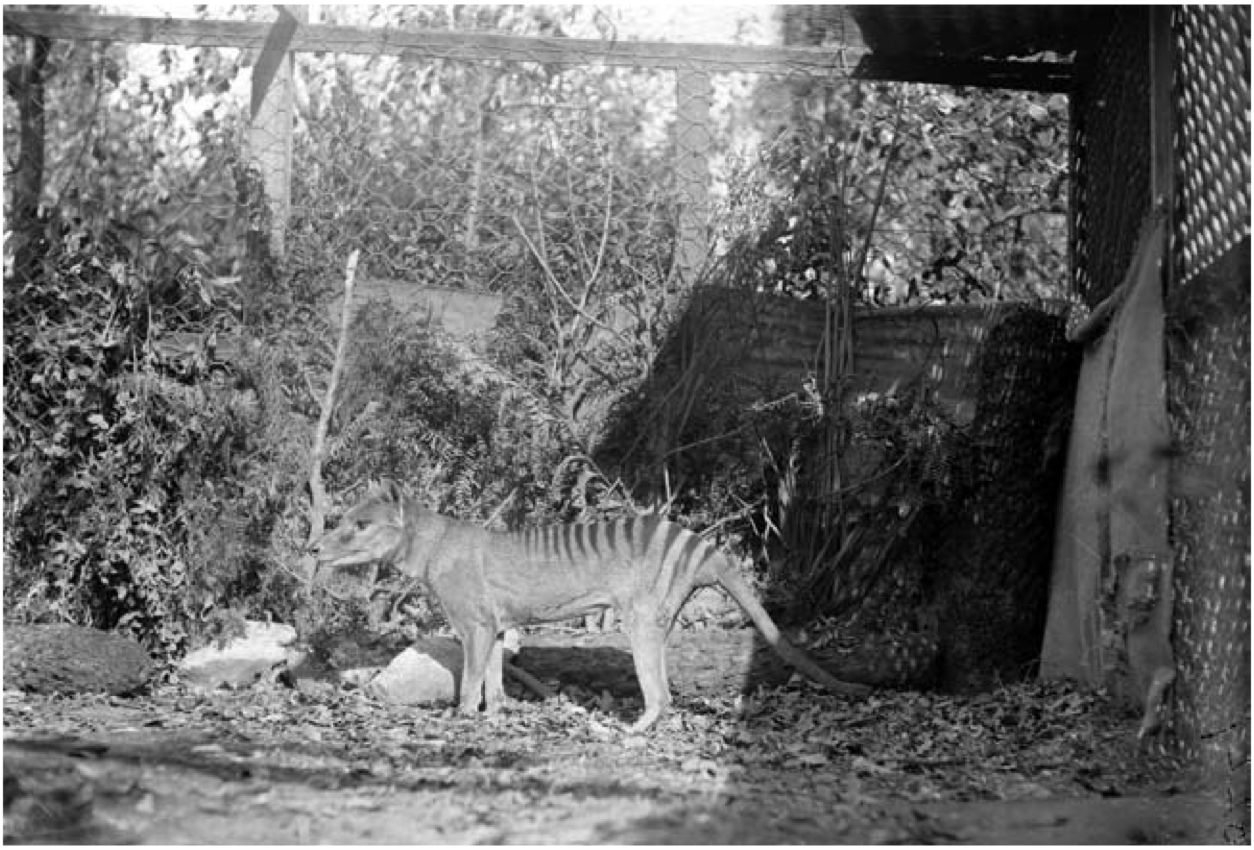

Figure 4. A high-resolution scan of glass plate negative V8227 of a thylacine without a chicken. Australian Museum Archives: series 392.

Figures 3 and 4 does not correspond to the background and foreground shadows. However, in all pictures the focusing points correspond, the dot grain emulsion is similar, the tonal separation is similar, the focusing depth corresponds and the F8 aperture used for a distance shot is apparent, implying the photographs were taken at the same time, under the same conditions and with the same camera.[9]

In all photographs there is a very narrow depth of field, with blurring of the vegetation in the background and foreground, neither of which are in focus. Some blurring is also apparent on the same plane as the figures; the figures on the other hand, are crisp and in focus – an uncommon occurrence in a photograph of an animal taken by cameras available at that time. It is especially remarkable given the apparently violent flapping of the chicken in the mouth of the animal in Figure 1. While there does appear to be some blurring of the head and neck of this thylacine, when the image is enlarged, brush or pencil marks that give the appearance of movement are apparent on the animal's head. There does not appear to be any straining apparent in the neck and shoulder musculature, consistent with lifting and holding a considerably large bird (L. Watson pers. comm. 2005, Southern Cross University).[10] Both animals have the same number of stripes in a virtually identical sequence and width, particularly apparent in their spacing on the backbone, supporting Laird's assertion that the same specimen appears in both photographs. Although the forking on the long stripes is not identical, if the specimen had been turned around it would, indeed, show a slightly different configuration on its opposite side. The front left leg is the leading leg in the case of both figures, however, there are some inconsistencies between the photographs: the ears are positioned at a slightly different angle, the tail of one is at a higher degree of elevation than the other, and the right hind leg of the animal with the chicken is slightly in front of the left, while its chin appears to be tucked closer to its body. These discrepancies may be due to a change in the position of the photographer, the specimen's limbs having been adjusted slightly, or technical manipulation of the images. However, it must be conceded that the thylacines in the photographs are probably, rather than definitely, the same specimen.[11]

There are many indications that both figures are mounted specimens rather than live animals: they are in the classic profile position favoured for descriptive purposes, an event unlikely to be captured at the same time of day, in exactly the same location, with and without a chicken.

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[9] Photographic staff at the Australian Museum, Sydney, provided this technical information.

[10] Loraine Watson is a research scientist who formerly worked on the Thylacine Cloning Project at the Evolutionary Biology Unit, Australian Museum, Sydney. She is one of two people associated with different areas of thylacine research who made an unsolicited observation that the animal in the photograph seemed to be a specimen.

[11] Stephen Sleightholme of the International Thylacine Specimen Database Project assisted in the assessment of the two figures.

Their posture is unrealistically rigid, rear feet are at a similar angle and their legs are stick-like; when enlarged, the eyes of both are pale and vacant and in Figure 4 the outline of the eye seems to have been accentuated – an example of the "retouching marks on the head" that Laird mentions; their fur has a lifeless quality and does not sit smoothly over the skin; the appearance of the hindquarters and back legs, particularly on the figure with the chicken, suggest wasted flesh, while in both there are flat and abruptly concave areas on the body that are characteristic of taxidermy. The latter is particularly apparent on the lower part of the abdomen in Figure 4 and 5 and also in the region of the jaw. The figure without a chicken has numerous marks on its body not consistent with a live animal and Figure 3 shows evidence of a join or crack in the taxidermy near the base of the tail. Figure 5 shows a fainter line and a dark shadowed area on the underside of the tail, implying paint has been applied to erase the crack and/or disguise the indentation beneath it by blending it into the background. While live thylacines sometimes exhibit a folding of the skin on the underside of the tail, it does not appear as a line that extends from one side of the tail to the other as indicated in Figure 3.[12] If the photographs show a live animal, why do all five pictures in the series capture the thylacine in the same spot near several rocks against a contrived background that disguises the wire fence behind it? Surely the subject would have moved around the enclosure as is the usual practice of captive animals, whether tame or not, especially when in possession of prey and approached by a human positioning a large, cumbersome camera inside the cage? The scene looks "staged" rather than the result of hours of patient watching and waiting for the right moment, which would have resulted in rolls of film being spent (L. Watson pers. comm. 2005). The lack of any other photographs taken of the same animal in the same location also suggests that the situation depicted is fabricated and that a considerable amount of time was taken to set up the images (G. Spring pers. comm. 2005, Scientific and Industrial Photography Unit, RMIT Uni.).

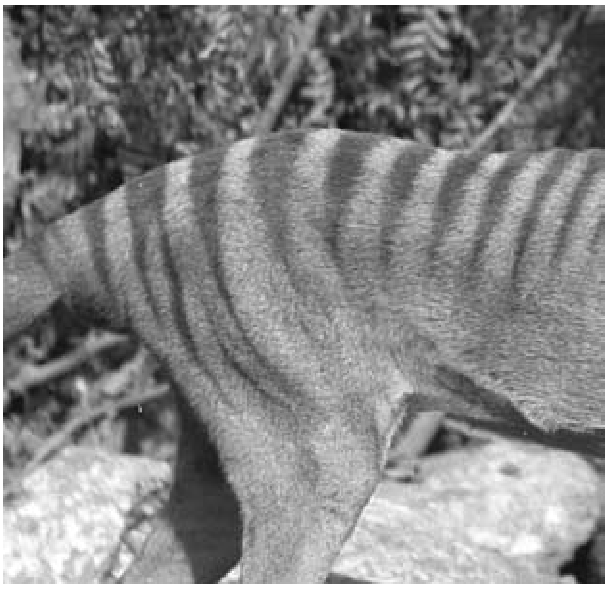

Figure 5. Detail of Figure 2 showing wasted flesh on the hindquarters and lower abdomen and retouching in the region of the tail.

So if the thylacine in the photograph shown in Figure 1 is dead, how was the impression of a live animal holding a chicken achieved? Laird states in folder NS1143/1 that the thylacine specimen was taken to the location: "it is a stuffed specimen placed against a bush background" (Laird 1945-77). If this was a composite picture, Laird would have been more likely to use terms that related to photographic processes rather than the simple word "placed" (P. Morse per. comm. 2005, Digital Imaging Unit, Uni. of Melb.). Technical advice (G. Spring and P. Morse pers. comm. 2005) suggests that the thylacine and the chicken were both *in situ*, that the chicken was dead and the appearance of movement in its wings may have been achieved through manipulation of the object, rather than manipulation of the image. The chicken was probably artificially attached to the figure's mouth, as it is unclear which part of the fowl's body the thylacine is holding. If the chicken were alive and the thylacine was holding the feathers on the very end of its wings, as it seems to be, feathers would be flying in all directions, but no feathers are visible on the ground. If the thylacine was holding the chicken's legs, the spatial orientation of the body is not correct, as the chicken's left wing would barely be visible. Areas of the photograph that may have made it obvious the thylacine was a mounted specimen have been retouched. Although there is no evidence of paint on the negative, re-shooting the picture would have resulted in making the new image look like the original while leaving its negative untouched (Richin 1990). Hurley's photographs show how skilfully images could be revised, so that there are very few clues visible in the final print (O'Keefe 1986). A search for other photographs of the location has been fruitless, although a drawing that resembles the animal in Figure 1 with the note "the photo published is owned by the Australian Museum Sydney *but* was taken by Burrell on his Namoi property about 1921"(my italics), is included in a private collection of Laird's papers and notes (Laird 1943-78). Burrell had established a small zoological garden at Manilla, NSW (Moyal 2001) and this might have been the site of the photographs. There was every reason for constructing a picture of a 'living' animal, as the only live thylacine recorded in New South Wales at the time was one acquired by Taronga Zoo in 1918 that had its tail bitten off to within inches of its rump by the puma in the cage next door within three weeks of its arrival (Paddle 1993). Gilbert Whitley (1973) photographed the unfortunate creature in 1922 and considered the result "not suitable for publication". A copy of this blurred photograph is also held in the archives of the Australian Museum.

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[12] Ian Norton, taxidermist at the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston, comments that cracks near the base of the tail are common in taxidermy specimens as the skin becomes brittle (pers. comm. 2005). Damage is more likely to occur when storage is inadequate and mounts are transported from one place to another.

A search for the specimen used in Figure 1 or 2 has been unsuccessful, although a photograph of a mount that appeared in *The Bulletin* (29/3/2005) displays the same dry lifeless fur, damage at the base of the tail, and wasting on the lower abdomen, as the thylacine in the chicken photograph. This wasting is quite different to the skinny appearance of some examples of the species in zoos – the dry fur changes angle abruptly in a ridge and a plane, rather than appearing as a smooth depression in the flesh. Specimens differ quite markedly in the positions in which they are preserved, in the attitude and angle of their limbs, the proportions of their bodies and in their markings, so it should be relatively easy to identify a mount if it still exists. Furthermore, the stripes on the thylacine with the chicken in its mouth form a unique pattern, particularly the short second stripe behind the longest one on the animal's rump. However, photographs can be retouched and markings such as stripes added or lengthened (S. Sleightholme pers. comm. 2004), while shadows on some old photographs can make the exact trajectory of a stripe indistinct. In addition, stripes on old specimens are subject to fading and skin deteriorates (I. Norton pers. comm. 2005). Failure to match stripes, then, is not necessarily an indication that the specimen does not exist. It was common for naturalists, educational institutions and other museums to borrow mounts from museums but, unfortunately, records of the acquisition and loan of specimens are often incomplete or missing entirely. As Burrell collected for the University of Sydney it is possible that he could have obtained the mount from there, but the specimen in the Macleay Museum at the University is also dissimilar to the thylacine in the photograph; another specimen once at this institution is missing, believed loaned to the Australian Museum. The National Museum in Canberra took possession of the holdings of the Institute of Anatomy, but their only specimen is a hairless, whole body preserved in Wentworth solution. Those held in the South Australian Museum and Museum Victoria have also been checked with negative results.[13] Mounted specimens in Tasmanian Museums that are accessible tend to be made by unskilled craftsmen, rather than professional taxidermists, and bear little resemblance to those in the photographs (I. Norton pers. comm. 2005).

Despite a failure to find the specimen or the location, my analysis has established that the photograph of the thylacine with a chicken indeed shows a specimen rather than a live animal, on the grounds that the image is cropped to omit any indications of an enclosure; the larger scene shows it has been constructed to mimic a 'bush' setting; the figure is improbably still and in focus and has unrealistically rigid, angular legs and feet; there are signs of retouching on the tail and body that imply imperfections in the skin have been disguised; and the torso shows signs of wasting and dull fur associated with taxidermy. In addition, the flapping chicken is not consistent with the attitude and position of the thylacine, it is unclear how it is being held and its violent movement is not consistent with the clarity of the thylacine's body. This visual evidence is supported by the status of the claim made by Burrell's colleague, Norman Laird, who had a detailed knowledge of photographic techniques, extensive information about the thylacine and scientific representation, and was a man who insisted on accuracy as regards the content and source of a photograph.

However, there are three more glass plate negatives deposited by Burrell in the Australian Museum Archives (V8226, V8225, V8222) that show a thylacine in the same location as the chicken photograph, but in more complex positions (Figures 6, 7 and 8). These photographs are not mentioned in Laird's folder and were not published during Burrell's lifetime, which is surprising if they show a live animal because they excite considerable interest in those studying the behaviour of the species, as indicated by the texts accompanying their rare use in contemporary thylacine literature (Guiler 1958; Moeller 1997).[14] If photographs are regarded as "passive recordings of a pre-existing sight" (Snyder 1994) and the discourse of the thylacine as predator is the dominant factor governing a reading of these images, they will appear to challenge the argument I have outlined above. However, if they are approached with scepticism informed by an awareness of the common photographic manipulation techniques widely used in the early twentieth century and knowledge of Burrell's interests and activities outlined in the following section of this paper, Figure 6 can be easily explained. It shows a thylacine almost side-on to the viewer with its head raised as if sniffing the air. The rear of its body exactly matches the body of the thylacine with a chicken, although it is in a slightly different position in relation to the background and the photographer. There are indications that two photographs were combined in this exposure: the first an image of a specimen taken from right-of-centre profile, the second taken of a thylacine's head from below. When the image is enlarged on a computer screen, this is supported by evidence that the head has been pasted onto the body: a clearly defined silhouette (consistent with a pasted addition) of the ears and upper part of the head against the dark background of the foliage is conveniently lost in shadow under the neck (consistent with airbrushed retouching effects). The new position of this specimen's body also reveals a deep cleft in its chest. Whether this is a 'natural' shadow, or a suggestion that it is an incomplete or damaged mount, is unclear. If it is the latter, this could be what Mitchell (1994) refers to as "the subtle inconsistency that shows up when the visual evidence is carefully cross-checked" which "trips up" the photographic manipulator. There are also many dust marks on this negative compared to Figure 2 and 4 – indications that a print has been rephotographed.

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[13] I am grateful to Stephen Sleightholme (ITSD) for assistance is comparing mounted specimens in the institutions above with those in the photographs.

[14] Underneath a reproduction of Figure 8 in Moeller (1997), line drawings of the thylacine's eating behaviour, derived from film footage of the species in Hobart Zoo, is included. Moeller states that, as they are held in Sydney, the photographs "probably also come from the animal in Taronga Park Zoo". He also uses this photograph as evidence that the thylacine was "occasionally" fed domestic chickens in zoos [translated from German by Liz Koolhof]. Guiler's text for Figure 7 (1958) describes the thylacine as a "blood feeder".

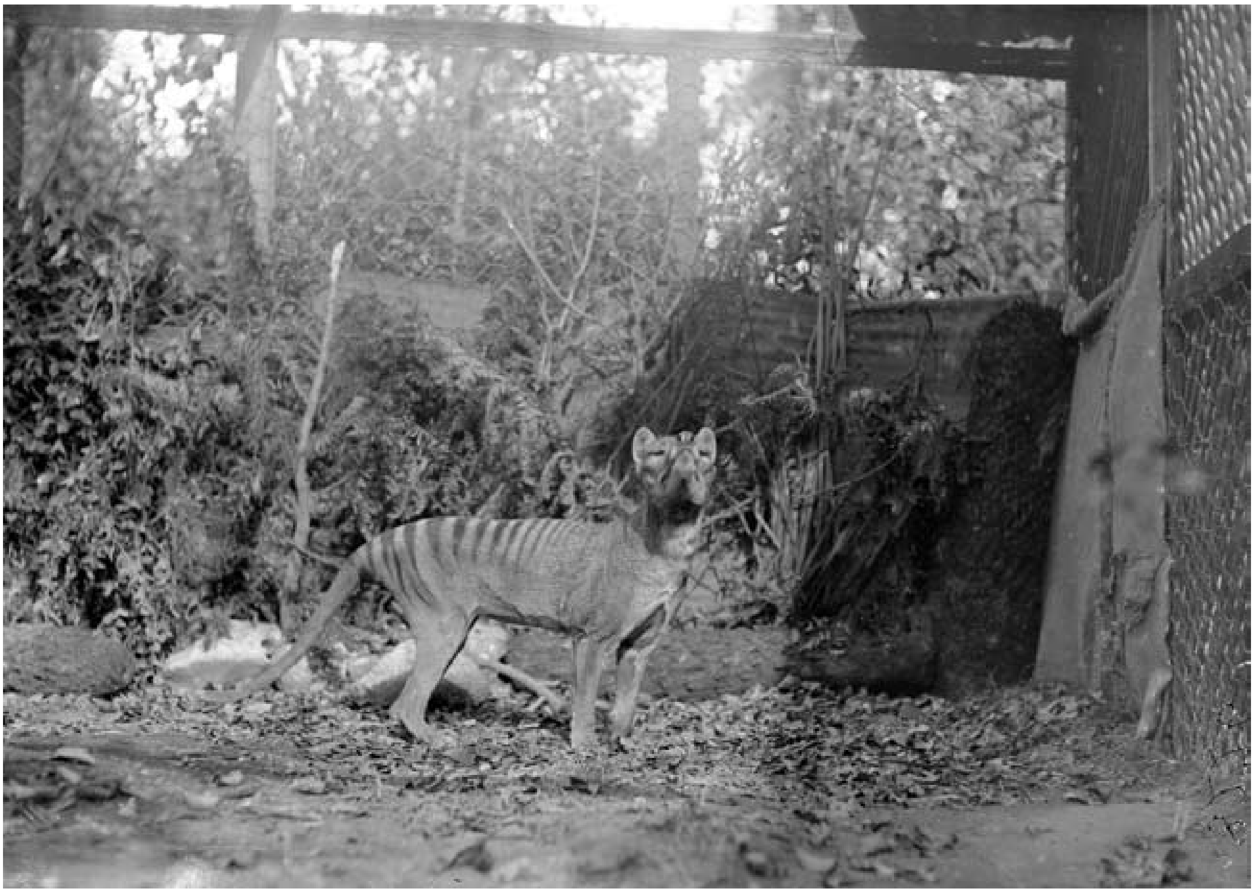

Figure 6. Glass plate negative V8226. Australian Museum Archives: series 392.

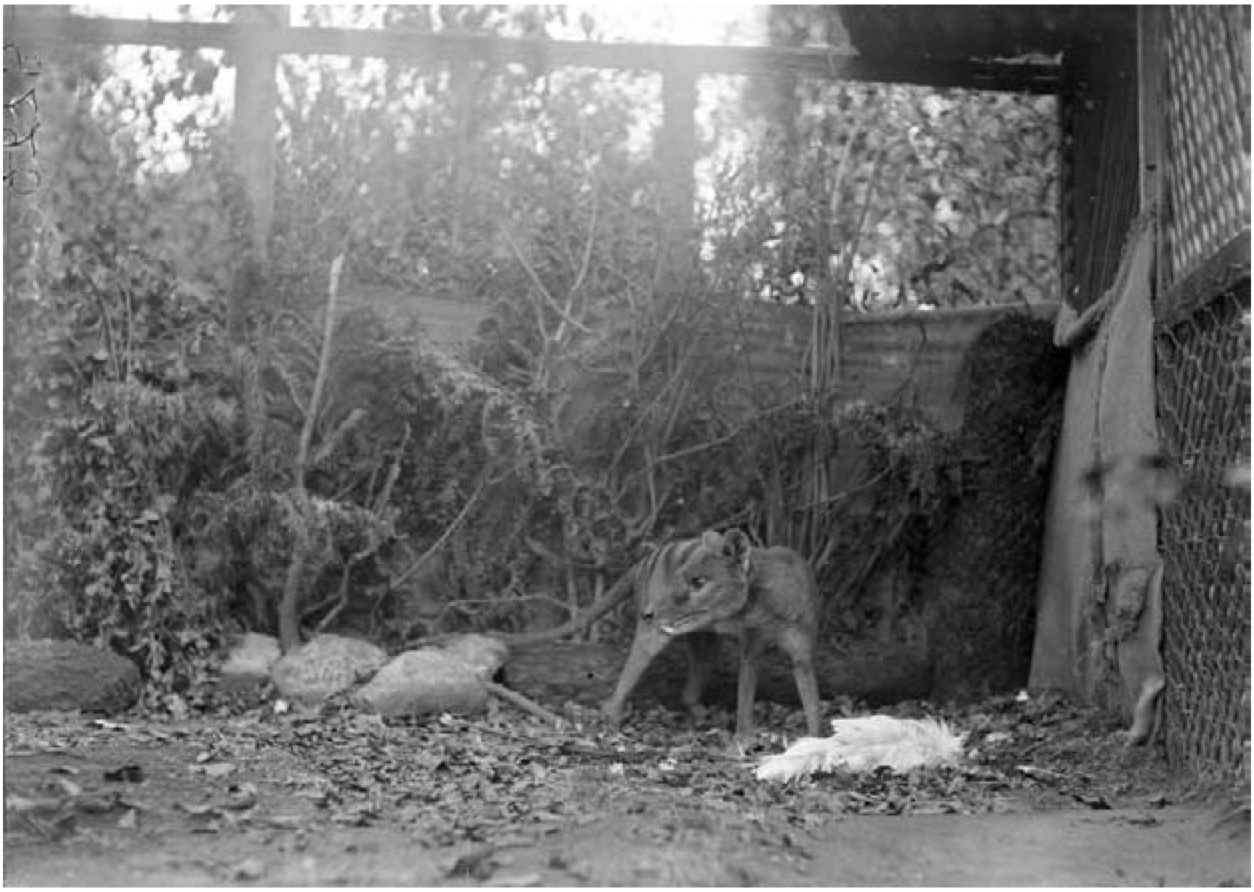

Figure 7. Glass plate negative V8225. Australian Museum Archives: series 392.

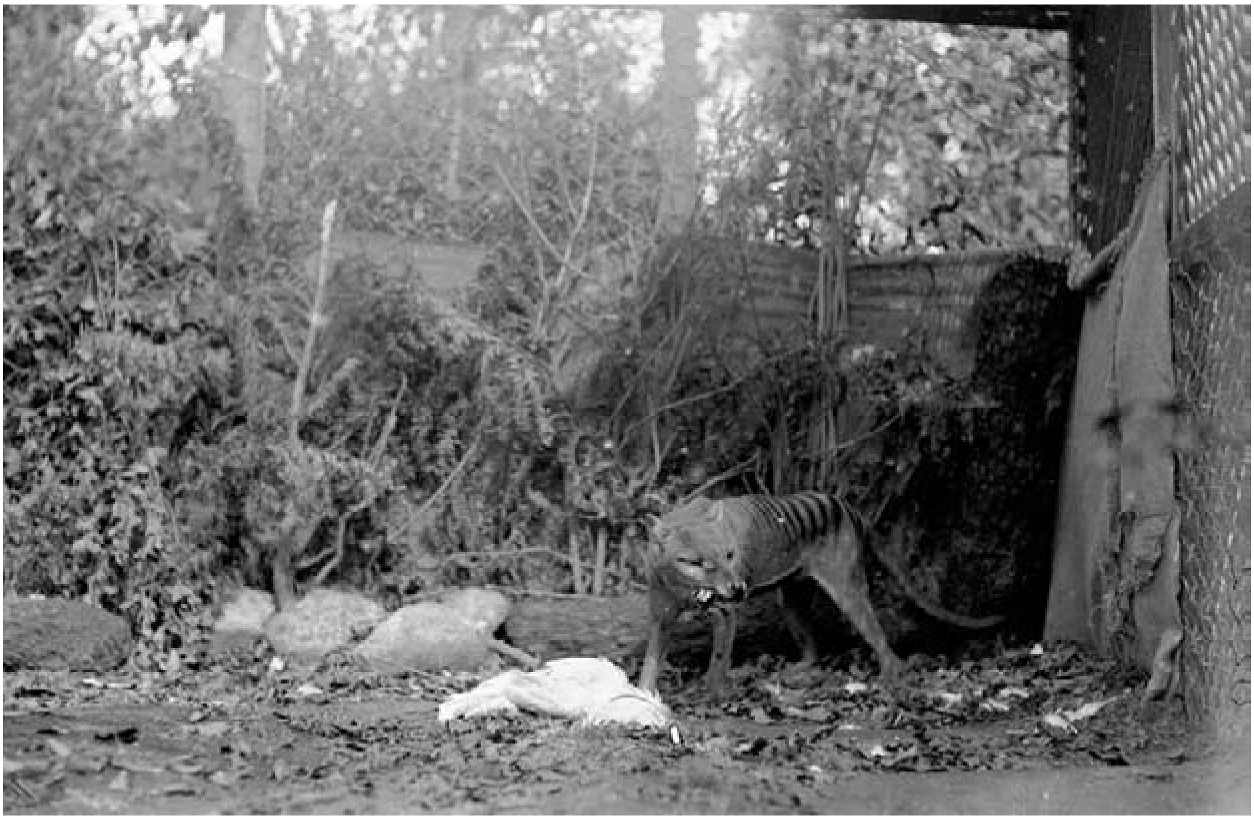

Figure 8. Glass plate negative V8222. Australian Museum Archives: series 392.

The focal point in the two remaining negatives (Figure 7 and 8) is just in front of the thylacine where a barely dismembered chicken carcase is lying. This leaves the body of the thylacine blurred and, as Mitchell (1994) writes, "blurring may be deliberate to conceal some of the imperfections" in a composite image. This must have been a well-fed animal, because apart from a few feathers now scattered around the area, the chicken is still intact. A chicken has an abundance of feathers; a hungry animal will rip these out in an attempt to reach the satisfying flesh. In Figure 7 the thylacine is facing the camera and twisted to the left. In Figure 8 its head is twisted to the right and both seem to have a piece of chicken feather or small bone in their mouths. The legs of both animals are in exactly the same splayed, stilt-like position. A viewer primarily interested in the behaviour of the thylacine may read this as an indication, or example, of the feeding position of the animal, but the existence in this limited sequence of two thylacines with their legs in exactly the same position (but reversed), suggests either another specimen has been used, or a picture of the hindquarters of a live animal has been superimposed on the background and an image of the front of an animal then grafted onto this. On the other hand, Figures 7 and 8 may show a live animal in the same location as the mount in the other negatives. If so, these two images demonstrate the difficulty of obtaining a clear photograph of the thylacine and one that shows the primary features of its body. This difficulty may have persuaded Burrell to use a specimen to achieve the result shown in Figure 2, and then wait to see if those who viewed the photograph noticed the difference between a specimen and a live animal.[15] The expression on the face of Figure 8 and the apparent consumption of food does suggest the forequarters of a live thylacine, but the eye of the animal in Figure 7 has a wide-open, glassy look suggesting a mount, while the feather or bone seems wedged into its mouth. There are also other indications that the photographed scene in Figures 7 and 8 has been contrived – the fowl in Figure 8 appears to have a label attached to it and both animals are, like the thylacines in all five negatives, close to the tree fern trunks and rocks that hold in place the 'bush background', as if they are propped up or steadied by them. Now a brief look at Harry Burrell's personality, interests and activities in the early twentieth century reveals both the inclination and an incentive for constructing such a deception.

The Inimitable Harry Burrell

Ann Moyal (2001) calls Burrell (1873-1945) "a knockabout lad" who put together a store of information about the behaviour and habitat of the platypus. He was an amateur naturalist, who had spent time as a travelling showman (Diana Wallis pers. comm. Manilla Heritage Museum) and is described in an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Walsh 1979) as having "a keen analytical mind" and as possessing a "breezy, hearty" temperament and a great sense of humour. The *Australian Encyclopaedia* 1958 refers to him as a

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[15] This scenario is not consistent with Laird's implication that the photograph was taken on Burrell's property on the Namoi (Laird 1943-78) as no captive thylacines are recorded in NSW in 1921, apart from the animal in Taronga Zoo.

"comedian-turned-naturalist". He settled on a property near Manilla NSW early in the twentieth century where he established a small collection of animals and began to investigate the platypus in the Namoi River. Burrell's work on this monotreme was based on "prolonged observation of its living form" over 20 years and he was able to shed light on the brain, breeding and egg-laying habits of the species, accumulating information that "neither nineteenth century naturalists nor embryologists on the cusp of two centuries had divined" (Moyal 2001). He was one of the first to successfully rear platypus in captivity, developing a portable tank that he called a 'platypusary' (Figure 9) and successfully transporting members of the species to New York Zoo (Anon. 1945). The results of his research into the habits of the platypus and other monotremes were published in a number of Australian and international scientific journals, including the *Australian Zoologist* (Burrell 1917, 1920, 1931). In his major work *The Platypus: its discovery, zoological position, form, characteristics, habits, life history, etc.* (1927) he demonstrates his ability to communicate the results of his research in a particularly erudite, elegant and effective way; on the other hand, he wrote amusing verse about the "mud-sucking platypus" (Moyal 2001). Many of Burrell's activities indicate that he sought original solutions to problems and often exhibited unconventional behaviour, factors that support the claim made by Laird. For example, the photographs in *The Playtypus* indicate he was adept at making intricate models of platypus burrows and also of using various techniques such as dissolving or blurring the background of a photograph to focus attention on the subject of the picture (Burrell 1927). A letter to Dr Gregory of the American Museum of Natural History in March, 1924 (Burrell 1924-39), apparently gives detailed instructions about how to set up a diorama of Australian native animals, including the lines "I would suggest a big log, or fallen tree … you can retain the same position of the group … obliterating the painted Roos on the background …the position, angle, and expression of the Dingo". The instructions indicate Burrell's awareness of, interest in, and aptitude for the lifelike display of animals. A display in the Tangled Destinies exhibition in the National Museum in Canberra includes three model 'nestlings' that Burrell constructed, in a real platypus nest. A short film sequence exhibited next to it demonstrates a device consisting of a transparent dome inserted into the bottom of a tank, which he invented to test what he referred to as the "sixth sense" of the species. The film shows Burrell with his head in the dome and his arms protruding into the tank through other holes; he is waving his arms to demonstrate how the platypus swimming in the tank uses a sense *other* than sight to detect the movement of his hands. This early film encapsulates the characteristics that made Burrell unique in zoological circles.

There is also evidence of Burrell's frustration that seems to stem from his status as an amateur naturalist. In the preface to *The Platypus* he complains that he has not received "official sanction to work as a private collector" and that this has resulted in his fieldwork practically stopping. It seems that recognition and support for his scientific work from professional zoologists and institutions was not always forthcoming. In a letter to

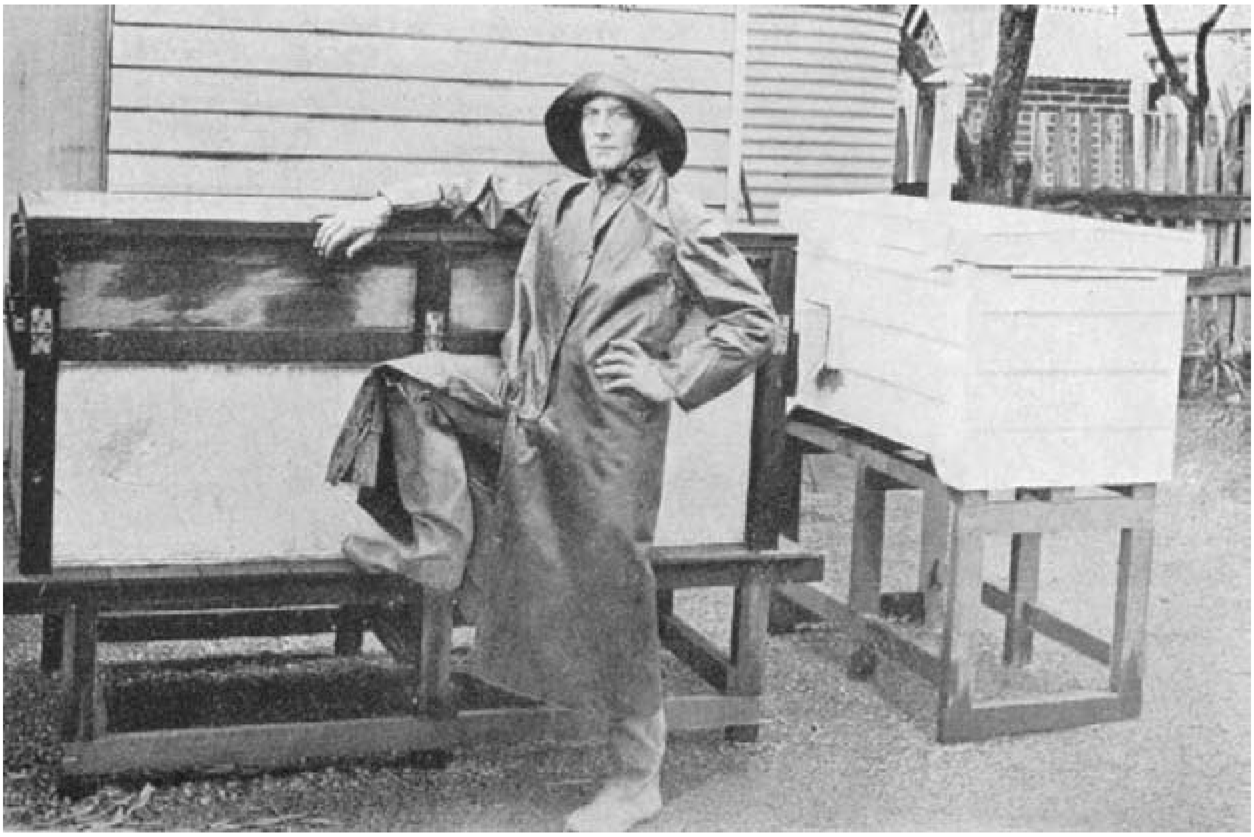

Figure 9. Harry Burrell with his portable platypusary. From his book *The Platypus* (1927).

H. C. Raven of the New York Zoological Society (1924-39) he refers to himself as a "Pseudo Scientist" and at the foot of one of his articles in *Australian Zoologist* (1925) the editor found it necessary to vouch for the status of Burrell's observations by adding the comment "Those who know Mr Burrell personally will recognise the value of his theories and suggestions, coming, as they do, from a man who has spent many years in exhaustively studying the monotremes in their natural surroundings". In a letter responding to the editor of *The Australian Museum Magazine* concerning the rejection of a poem about the platypus, Burrell exhibits more than a touch of embarrassed discomfort (Burrell 1924). Taking these factors into consideration, it is not unlikely that Burrell may have attempted to deceive with a fake photograph those he most wished to impress. The evidence suggests he was possessed of sufficient ability, disposition and motive for carrying out such an action. There is also a suggestion that someone may have been aware of his photographic deception, as Burrell makes a point of stating in the preface to *The Platypus*, "all my descriptions have been written from living specimens or from material freshly collected; museum specimens and records have been deliberately ignored". While this statement may not be unusual, when Burrell also notes that "the illustrations also show living platypus … and none of the photographs reproduced have been touched up in any way", his tone seems unduly defensive. In the light of protests about the manipulation of photographs at this time, it is possible that Burrell was worried that knowledge of his hoax might compromise the reception of his most important publication.

Historical Contexts and Significance

Burrell's photograph has continued to be credible partly because it shows a situation viewers *expect* to see. This expectation exists because the thylacine has been constructed as a danger to domestic animals for almost two centuries and the assumption has become an inextricable part of the discourse of the thylacine. Whether the animal is captive or not, a thylacine with a chicken appears 'natural' and so the figure is assumed to be alive and taking an active role in the action — the illustration confirms the myth. Sontag (1977) contends a fake photograph "falsifies reality" because assumptions of truth are made about photography that are not made in relation to other mediums. These assumptions deter the viewer from questioning whether the figure in the picture is or was living, then, with the help of the texts that accompany it, the behaviour the figure exhibits is also understood to apply to the whole species. The real deception in this image, the substitution of a dead animal for a live one, is far more disturbing than the cropping noted by Paddle, for it constructs not just the circumstances of poultry predation, but even the action. The most significant problem with this photograph is that it sustains the hyperbole that the species was a serious threat to poultry, sheep and human endeavour in general.

The uncritical reception of this picture demonstrates the power of photography to "fix impressions" (Wright 2003). The photograph's appearance in 1921, a time that was crucial in terms of the survival of the species, had the capacity to re-ignite fears, promote further persecution and discourage a recovery in numbers. Assumptions about the medium allowed the image to reinforce, in a particularly potent way, the idea that the thylacine posed a significant threat to human interests that had earlier been used as an excuse (Paddle 2000) for the disastrous government bounty that operated on the species from 1888 to 1909. Its appearance in the particular publications dealt with here is also significant: as well as the explicit claim – "from life"– on its first publication, the photograph carries implicit veracity when it appears in a magazine associated with a national scientific institution. The photo is featured at the beginning of the third issue of the *Magazine* and has only a brief text, but it emphasises the message in the picture. It says: "the Tasmanian Tiger or Wolf … is the most powerful of flesh-eating mammals … in its evolution it has closely paralleled the European wolf and other carnivores, its teeth in particular being similarly modified for rending flesh". The power of the text – the violent association of the words "rending" and "teeth" – together with the visual impact of the soft, white, insubstantial feathers in the photograph, produces highly emotive imagery. Ironically, it is followed by an article by American zoologist W.K. Gregory (1921) titled "Australian Mammals and why they should be protected" which explains why Australian animals are "perhaps the most interesting in the world". This essay is illustrated by a sequence of photographs of animals in the Museum's dioramas and it concludes with the bracketed note that "the photographs in this article, when not taken from life, are from specimens in the Australian Museum". There is no indication, however, that the editors of *The Australian Museum Magazine* were aware that Burrell's photograph showed a specimen or that editorial staff knowingly misled their readers, although the first issue in April, 1921 notes "surely an animal is more interesting when it is presented, not as a mere dead thing, but as a living, breathing creature" (Anderson 1921).

The specific ways in which the photograph and its texts interact exemplify how effectively ideas about the thylacine were produced. While the image in *The Australian Museum Magazine* could be perceived as showing the behaviour of an individual animal, the label "Marsupial Wolf (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*)" in *The Wild Animals of Australasia* renders the photograph as a representation of the *species*. Paradoxically, because there is no explanatory note attached to the illustration to explain its origin, assumptions are encouraged and the text in this book becomes loaded with significance. The selection of ideas and the way they are phrased work with the photograph in a particularly persuasive way. The entry concentrates on the thylacine's hunting and feeding behaviour, quotes anecdotal evidence that uses words like "carcass" and "victim" and conjures images of unpredictable movements like the thylacine's "one sharp fox-like bite" that tears a dog's skull off. While reference to other behaviour is included, images that invoke violent and exciting allusions predominate in this popular work. When it was reviewed in volume 3 of *The Australian Museum Magazine* (Anon. 1927) it was noted, "it is the illustrations … which make the strong popular appeal" and the "104 life-study photos" are particularly remarked upon. This is consistent with the aim of the *Magazine*, which the Museum stated was part of an "increased effort to reach a wider public", particularly children.

Discussion

This investigation of Norman Laird's claim has drawn attention to processes and practices relating to photography, to the extraordinary power of photographs and the assumptions made about them and the thylacine, and to interactions between visual and textual statements in early publications of the image. Reproductions of the photograph since that time further develop and extend the meanings the photograph generates. As Peter Wollen (1989) points out, "from the moment they are published, images are contextualised and, frequently, if they become famous, they go through a whole history of re-publication and re-contextualisation. Far more is involved than the simple doubling of the encounter of photographer with object and spectator with image". For instance, in the later twentieth century when used to illustrate an essay by Eric Guiler (1958) in *The Australian Museum Magazine*, the photograph's caption reads "The thylacine is primarily a blood feeder and eats only selected parts of its prey" and in 1973 in the journal *Animals* it is accompanied by the words "Thylacine in captivity, just after it had been thrown a fowl" (Brown 1973), while in *Australian Natural History* in 1990 it is designated "One of the last photos of a live Thylacine, from the Australian Museum Archives" (Faith 1990). Often, the photograph seems to be notionally reconstructed in relation to the purposes of a text and, with every new explanation, the possibility that the image is misleading is buried more deeply.

Awareness of the way in which photographs can simulate reality is in the interests of recognising and producing good science. As pointed out by Lunney and Matthews (2003) at a forum on Zoology and the Media, the way animals are pictured can play a vital role in fostering negative or affirmative attitudes and actions towards them, and unusual or eye-catching images are often used to draw attention to a story. Lunney and Burgin (2004) have also explored the importance of published reports in the management of urban wildlife and the recovery of threatened species. Threatened animals such as grey-headed flying foxes *Pteropus poliocephalus* and Tasmanian devils *Sarcophilus harrissi* are particularly vulnerable to the perceptions that are generated by images and, in retrospect, it is significant that almost all photographs of the thylacine that display deception of some kind have been altered to depict negative behaviour or characteristics.[16] Scepticism is therefore a necessary part of viewing pictures, especially when they are used as evidence of activities considered controversial, and digital technology has complicated the issue. Philip Jones Griffiths (Jacobson 2002) notes that although photographs have often been faked in the past, the practice has "enjoyed a quantum leap with the advent of computerised manipulation. Now, with digital cameras … fraudulent practice is easy and detection is difficult". Robin Williams (Simpson 1993), Dean of Art, Design and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, and a leading medical and scientific photographer expands on this point: "you will never be able to tell which is the original even under a microscope. The resolution of the digital work is higher that the resolution of a photograph". However, Mitchell (1994) provides a list of guidelines for evaluating an image and points out that most pictures we see in our daily lives have been digitally recorded, transmitted and processed. Awareness of the persuasiveness of photography is therefore pertinent to many areas of activity apart from scientific study. Photographs associated with the war in Iraq and the Tsunami disaster illustrate the overwhelming presence of the camera and the importance that photographic images can possess, as well as their capacity to deceive.

I have presented evidence that suggests the photograph of the thylacine with a chicken is a fake from a visual and circumstantial point of view, but this paper also raises questions related to the production and location of the photographs in the series and I invite zoological history researchers to fill the gaps in the story. For example, what was the purpose of Harry Burrell's deception and why did he deposit the negatives of this series of photographs in the Australian Museum Archives? Was it an admission of his ruse, or was he taunting the institution he apparently deceived? A detailed biography of Burrell, the fascinating, enigmatic, amateur naturalist, is still to be written. There are many details about the production of the negatives that could be clarified, such as determining the degree to which the images were technically manipulated and if, (and in what form and to what extent) live animals were involved in Figures 7 and 8. Laird mentions a 16mm black and white reversal motion picture, "of which the whereabouts is now unknown", that was taken "at the same time as the still photographs" (Laird 1945-77). This film may answer many of the questions about the production of all or some of the images, but others may never be answered because there simply is no relevant material now available.[17] This discussion has focussed on the issue of photographs as reliable evidence in an attempt to stimulate interest in and awareness of inaccuracies in the representation of the thylacine and other animals. There is no doubt that further examination of this series of negatives in the Australian Museum Archives is worth at least another thousand words toward understanding the relationship between the extinction of the thylacine and the way in which the species was depicted.

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[16] Most of these involve highlighting the animal's wide gape, or the addition of long teeth. One well-known photograph of a thylacine curled in the grass with closed eyes and an open mouth is probably of a dead animal, however, its peculiar appearance is never mentioned in publications.

[17] When exposed and developed a "reversal film" produces a positive; there is no negative. It was ideal for home movies and usually only one exposure is made, so it is unlikely that the film will be found. According to staff at Manilla Heritage Museum, many of Burrell's papers were lost after his death in 1945.

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Postscript

There are two prints of a thylacine in the Harry Burrell Collection (Series 392) in the Australian Museum Archives that seem unconnected with the glass plate negatives discussed in the paper "Is this picture worth a thousand words?" as they have a completely different background. To my knowledge, they have never been published and may be of interest to those involved in the history of the thylacine and zoological history generally.

As they are prints, rather than negatives, someone other than Burrell may have taken them. Examination by a photographic expert may supply an approximate date of production. The thylacines in both photographs are shown in profile in front of a white wall with tussocks of grass in raised heaps of earth on what appears to be a concrete floor. The closed door to the right is slightly dirty and damaged. When scans of the photographs are enlarged on a computer screen, it is apparent that on the left portion of the white wall the shadow of wire mesh is just visible, implying this is a zoo enclosure. In one of the photographs, V8223, the tip of the animal's tail appears to be missing.

This blunt tail prompted me to compare the photograph with one by A.F. Bassett Hull that illustrates Sharland's paper in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW,* 1938-39. The animal in that blurry photograph also appears to have the tip of its tail missing, however, the photograph seems to have been retouched to ensure the shape of the tail stands out against a dark wall immediately behind the animal. It cannot be discounted, then, that the tail has been outlined incorrectly. As far as can be discerned, the enclosure in the photograph also has a concrete floor and a portion of the wall jutting out, as it does in the photograph in Burrell's collection. In the distance, rectangular wire mesh is apparent, changing angle at the roofline. According to Robert Paddle (pers. comm. 2004), Bassett Hull's photograph was taken at Taronga Zoo of the last thylacine held by the Royal Zoological Society of NSW. However, it is *not* the thylacine that had its tail bitten off by the puma in the cage next door (Paddle 1993) as a photograph taken by Gilbert Whitely (Australian Museum Archives, Gilbert Whitley papers: series 139), referred to in his article "I remember the thylacine"(1973), shows an animal with a much shorter tail.

Was the photograph taken at Taronga Park Zoo? If this is not the thylacine with the bitten tail that died in 1923, did it reside at the Zoo at another time? or was it photographed in different circumstances?

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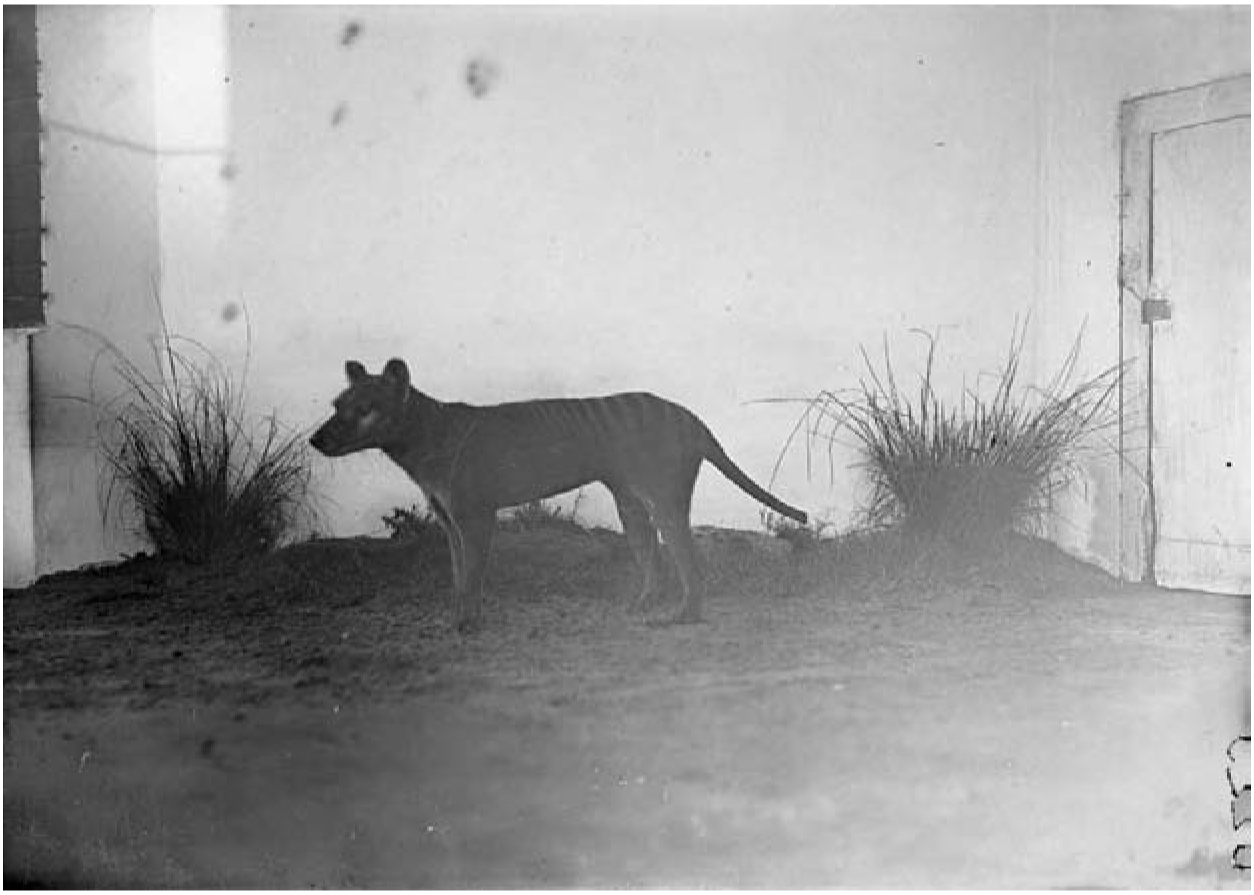

Print V8223 in the Australian Museum Archives: series 362.